common pink

Nola Fischer

Maria Persu

Marthe Meinhold

Artur Lezard

Mücahit Türk

Bryony Dawson

More
Melancholia

Letter from the editors

Yesterday I forgot my password. Forgetting something is synonymously described as losing something. Which seems about right. Though I wasn't even the one really keeping the password, my computer was, or so I thought. Anyway, being forced to repeatedly come up with a new one can put me in a dissociative melancholic state. Even though I clearly did not exactly know my password, I felt somehow attached to it. And now I found myself being a bad keeper: I hadn't taken good care of it, enough care. I had given the responsibility away.

All a password wants is to be remembered. Which is a lot these days. With the rising number of accounts one is asked to operate online people have difficulties remembering, keeping all these passwords on their own as well as they struggle creating them in ways that match current cyber security standards. Online you are advised to make them as difficult as possible, consisting at least of 8 characters; uppercase and lowercase letters, numbers and special symbols. It's advised to make them completely unintelligible so no one, or no thing, can guess them and it's common that one is offered a generated, random combination so that you don't have to break your head making up gibberish. Making up gibberish is really fun but, as Benjamin Franklin put it, time is money. Passwords which are personal or simple are seen as unsafe. But obviously the more complex they get the more difficult they become to remember so the possibility to have them automatically saved obviously comes in handy.

I remember, someone whom everybody in school had a crush on owned a hoodie that said "Jesus Freak" on the front. Dwelling back on the topic, this might make a nice personal password for Leo XIV now. He probably has to set up everything anew, the work iPad, the work phone, the ig account. No one would guess *Jeeeesus.Freak.* and yet it supposedly would have enough of a private relevance and connection for him. Enough to help him remember it, furthermore it would be humorous, which would be a nice touch. However, after repeatedly typing in a password one gets somehow desensitized to the original meanings the chosen words once carried. The meanings don't disappear entirely, nothing does, but the words kind of melt into keys, converted into an abbreviation for something else. On the topic of change the journalist and film-maker Adam Curtis (melancholiac) claims that there is this present feeling that nothing is changing, making "people feel melancholic about the future" and that this, as usual, has a lot to do with our own consciousness of our place in the world, what is possible, feeling lonely.

Some more ideas for the Pope: "...Oh.My.God…", "_C0rpu5delicti," "AmeN100!". „0:-)_Gabriel5"... Oh to be a Pope and make up your own password! Though he probably uses a variation of the same password for everything, as most Popes and people do. On Wikipedia it says "password" is number 4 on the list of the most commonly used passwords, having been counted 692,151 times. The numbers come from a password manager company that analyzes data breaches. There is a note saying the article needs to be updated. "Secret" is number 9. "123456" is number 1 (3 million),

“Dragon” number 19, “monkey” number 20, and “iloveyou” is number 17. I receive a text from my mother that Paypal got hacked and that I should change my password while a Lana Del Rey song unfolds on the regional train between Lutherstadt Wittenberg and Berlin. A couple next to me is having a romantic conversation. He is showing her photos that he took of her without her noticing. One he likes a lot because she looks so in her thoughts, as she so often does. Yes, she remembers the moment. She could have stayed there for hours. She felt so naturverbunden, close to nature. And here with her red jacket. Cake, they had cake there. She really likes the photos. They look so free. She thanks him for taking them all. Then she asks if he put all of them in his WhatsApp status. Yes, they will be gone after a day anyway. That’s ok, she says.

Thank you to all the contributors! We hope you enjoy this one.
Don’t lose hope, don’t forget us.
Finders keepers, xxx

cp

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She has not dared to look out the window for a while, but now she turns her head to the right a little and looks directly into the sunset. During the whole train journey she has been feeling nauseous and the brief view of passing fields is enough to shift the position of her organs. For a few seconds they seem to be back in their familiar place, while the train crosses a bridge and over dark water. But then the long curves begin again, past shady valleys and the last patches of sunlight in the trees.

She reaches for the headphones next to her and tries to move her upper body and head as little as possible. Arms and legs can do what they want. Perhaps she should not have drunk the whole bottle of juice so quickly before setting off. At least with this nausea she can listen to music without qualms and ignore the extraordinary presence of the sunset next to her. As it slowly gets dark outside the window, she listens to the sounds of a lute with an advance of conviction to guarantee that they will lead her away from the nausea.

The piece begins with a low note that sounds long and provides the basis for upward sequences of notes. They change speed along the way, as if you were falling into something, but the biggest fall happens, when the bass tone changes. A very soft fall, when you can feel it approaching and are relieved to follow it. After a little more than a minute, something changes. She imagines two people walking on a hillside, the one in front turns around while walking and says something to the one behind. She can see a whole scene before her, two men amid high grass and small insects against the light of the sun. Thirty seconds later the perspective seems to change and she can no longer make out the faces but sees the situation from a distance: two figures and the mountain behind them. This scene is accompanied by a final dramatic fall into a sun-warmed grassy hollow and by the end you have almost stood up again.

The next piece begins, and it seems relatively similar to the first. She does not particularly like it and switches to a song recommended to her by a friend. Strings ring in her ears again, this time much more metallic. A kind of veil of music and passing scenery covers her thoughts. As the first verse begins, her reflection in the window becomes clearer and clearer. Behind it, the bushes have become dark shadows and only against the background of the turquoise stripe on the horizon do individual branches sometimes become recognisable. The chorus that begins is reassuring, it reinforces what was just heard:

Uhhh uhhh uhhh uhhh
Uhhh uhhh uhhh uhhh
Uhhh uhhh uhhh uh hh uhhh

Sequences of notes continue to descend and only change direction upwards at the end. A similar kind of fall as before into the grassy hollow, but this time much longer and more inevitable, yet still together.

She had previously avoided looking at her reflection, but now she takes a quick look at herself in the window pane. Her mirrored face opens its mouth. If she tilts her head slightly the horizon and her mouth are at the same level and she can swallow long stretches of it.

The song that is about to begin is one that she knows very well. At first she feels reluctantly reminded of another time, then she forgets to think about it any further. ‘Disappear - into your arms - hold me tight - Think of me - when you’re alone - no one’s home’. She realises another voice has been mingling with the singer’s for some time. The family next to her is preparing to get off the train. ‘I think we’re onto something, onto some-thing, onto something,’ it rings in her ears. Meanwhile a little further away she hears: ‘Check again next to the seats to see if we have forgotten anything, and on the floor!’ She no longer feels sick, but she does not feel fully present. The horizon lies folded in the coils of her gut.

hhh uhhh
hhh uhhh
hhh uh hh uhhh

Maria Persu

From Socialist Realism to 'Postsocialist Realness': A Weird[1] Reading — with Şerban Savu's Painterly Practice

PRELUDE

Sometimes, in the evenings, my flatmate remarks on my 'Slavic melancholia'.
He does so laughingly, and I accept. I agree, I even feel good.
I'm not really Slavic.
I'm not very sure I understand.

The melancholic event

If you grew up in the postsocialist East, you might know this image already: Six road workers on the side of a freeway–at the centre of the tableau, a hole has been dug up to run one to two metres deep. Beer cans–and cigarette buts–are shooting like tulips out of the sun-burnt soil. A concrete mixer waiting on the margins. You might know this image already–out of the six road workers, only one is visibly 'working': replacing electricity cables, fixing some dysfunctional sewage system. Perhaps one or two are giving verbal instructions, or producing some kind of live commentary or critique. The other three or four road workers are found pondering, visibly signing off, gazing far away into the horizon, resting their body weights on shovels or just standing upright with their arms akimbo. This already canonical picture of Eastern 'inefficiency' represents, in everyday discourse, a readily available currency of self-Balkanisation through the immediate Other, a self-loathing vocabulary always ready to cite 'backwardness' and 'undercivilisation'.

You might know this image already: I find myself by the side of a barbecue enjoying (?) a weekend family gathering in the countryside. In-between conversations that often amount to genealogical tracings of when exactly in our life histories things had been fundamentally *better*–citing topics as varied as *better* holidays, *better* electoral freedom, *better* romance or *better* recycling practices–my relatives and I collectively engage in alcohol-fuelled moments of contemplative silence. Nonverbally submerging into a pre-digestive rumination ritual–not knowing exactly why, we are 'relaxing' our minds by eluding something in ourselves and the others. Are these two tableaus…melancholic synergies of different contexts but the same genre?

In his famous essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud tentatively describes melancholia to be "in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness"[2]. Unlike mourning, where what is grieved after is intelligible both to the suffering party and to the outside observer–such as the death of a loved one–, in melancholia, sadness and self-loathing are somewhat indeterminate: a-objective, ambivalent, with

You might know this image alrea

1 WEIRD: read not-usual and queer/crip-informed. The title of this essay is strategically covert–in the effort of QUEERING and CRIPPING a hegemonically-masculine, necessarily-heterosexual, efficiency-focused social canon.
2 Freud, S. 'Mourning and Melancholia', 1917, p. 245.

an enigmatic cause. Freud explains that, after the shattering of an unknown object-relationship, the melancholic's libido fails to transfer to another object, withdrawing into the ego instead.[3] In other words, the subject is somehow alienated without knowing why, seemingly idle but in fact engaged in heavy internal work.

1

In Freud's formulation, however, melancholia is rather depoliticised and pathologised[4], failing to account for the normative regimes of different kinds of labour and their respective temporalities of (re)production.[5] Here, I want to make the case for the melancholic event as a politics of time rupturing that–unknowingly–divests from different types of normativity by being both object-less and about object-loss, aimless and idle in nature. In the postsocialist context, the melancholic event affectively reflects the external and internal failures of transfer–on political and economic scales–from socialism to capitalism. An economics of pain, that is however as much about the outside as it is about the inside, as the rejected dreams of an unwanted and unrealised communist utopia transitioned into the unfulfilled promises of liberal freedom and capitalist prosperity. Occurring in the presence rather than absence of others, the melancholic event is implicated in a sociality of suffering that, although not-fully-known, fleeting and unrecognised, involves its own politics.

eady

3 Ibid., p. 249.
4 Detailed discussions on psychoanalysis, its complicity with maintaining gendered norms alongside its critical potential if placed in dialogue with queer and feminist theory, have continued to emerge in recent years. See for instance Preciado (2021), Webster (2023), Bourlez (2023). With regards to Freud's writings on melancholia, Judith Butler (1997) develops an extensive discussion on re-establishing a relationship between melancholia, subjectivation, and social dynamics of power in their book The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection.
5 Halberstam (2005) expands on queer temporalities as non-normative and counter-normative ways of living.

Unlike mourning, where what is grieved after is intelligible both to the suffering party and to the outside observer—such as the death of a loved one—, in melancholia, sadness and self-loathing are somewhat indeterminate

Realism after utopia

2

The idea of the melancholic event as a postsocialist disposition first came to my mind when visiting the Romanian Pavilion at the 2024 Venice Biennale. The exhibition *What Work Is* displayed Șerban Savu's painterly worlds in an iconographic format–a polyptych of about forty paintings, spanning over a decade of the artist's work. It also included contributions by the Brussels-based design studio Atelier Brenda, invited to respond to Savu's works with interventions on the pavilion's facade and within the exhibition space itself. Overall, the installation aimed to "capture and portray moments of pause and inactivity as reflections of broader societal changes or crises."[6] Furthermore, it wished to provide a response to the title of the 60th edition of the Biennale *Foreigners Everywhere* by evoking "the sense of disorientation in a political or economic limbo" and the "feelings of displacement and homesickness associated with migratory work."[7]

6 Author n/a, "Serban Savu: What Work Is", 2024, para. 2.
7 Ibid., para. 3.

In Savu's paintings, quotidian scenes appear lightly disturbed, being enveloped in carefully architected environments. They together constitute the peripheral landscape politics of the polyptych–where micro-encounters, indeterminate activities, ruins of buildings from different epochs, mono-culture forests, spaces of transit, construction alongside archeological sites, plastic chairs and branded umbrellas, all frozen onto the canvas, participate in undoing eventfulness and imposing a suspension of time. Through painting as a medium, the melancholic event as fleeting, socially silent and concealed is made visible and further augmented–becoming-political by being made static and, in the context of the Venice installation, by being scaled up from its 'natural' proportions.

To further explore the implications of denaturalising melancholic performances from the quotidian, I am particularly interested in the art historical link to socialist realism articulated by Savu's painterly practice. I believe this link unlocks compelling avenues by which postsocialist melancholia might be repoliticised– in non-essentialist, situated ways.[8] Painterly techniques of representation, such as those of Savu, enact pressing epistemological additions, juxtaposing layers of historicity that might otherwise go unnoticed in observational analyses of the social as it is performed in daily encounters. Specifically, I want to argue that Șerban Savu's paintings embed the melancholic event in an intricate hauntology, marking, in Derrida's terms, "two directions of absence, at the articulation of what is no longer and what is not yet".[9]

With and beyond their eeriness, Savu's paintings are atmospherically enveloped in the failure of socialist utopianism, which supposed a compulsory aesthetics of futurity and social progress. As Boris Groys writes in his book *The Total Art of Stalinism*: "The world promised by the leaders of the October Revolution was not merely supposed to be a more just one or one that would provide greater economic security, but it was also and in perhaps even greater measure meant to be beautiful."[10] Therefore, rather than restoring *mimesis* or imitation as the ideal relationship between representation and reality in art, socialist realism in the Stalin era in fact inherited "the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing

3

8 See Donna Haraway's (1988) influential article on situated knowledges.
9 Derrida, J. Specters of Marx, 1997, p. 30.
10 Groys, B. The Total Art of Stalinism, 1992, p. 3.

4

life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetico-political project."[11] In contrast to this, in Savu's paintings the beautiful and the just do not coalesce. Sociality at the periphery emerges as one of fragmentation instead of collectivism, of inertia and disengagement instead of proactivity and enthusiasm. There is nothing pedagogical about Savu's genre painting, with human bodies that are far from exemplary, and social gatherings that are highly decentralised and to a degree purposeless.

While dwelling in ruins and dissolved social forms, however, the works do not lend themselves to a nostalgic reading in relation to the socialist past. To instantiate, although monumental murals akin to socialist propaganda art feature as a subject matter throughout many of Savu's paintings, they are ambiguously situated artworks *within* the artwork, either somewhat alien archeological artifacts, or still visibly under construction, suggesting the difficult politics of heritage making. Instead, juxtaposing different political symbolisms and traditions of painting and folk art, the presence of these murals can be instead seen as critically pointing to the complexity of nostalgic politics in certain ex-socialist geographies, where neoconservative discourses exhibit wistfulness towards an incoherent rather than a determinate time and space. Inserting symbols that are unusual for such neotraditionalist politics, they thus revive a countermemory using "ambiguity, irony, doublespeak, private intonation".[12] As such, Savu's painterly practice can equally be set apart from the nostalgia mode of postmodernism, being far from a neutral pastiche, rendering our experiences of alienation *somewhat* knowable.

What exists in Savu's polyptych worlds and, I argue, in the melancholic event too–is a crucially *haunted* sense of 'the now'. As such, Savu's scenes may be read as heterochronies[13] rather than dystopian. That is, they do not express the fundamental opposite of socialist realist utopia, but equally 'elsewhere'-sites that accumulate time "in its most fleeting,

11 Ibid., p. 36.
12 Boym, S., The Future of Nostalgia, 2001, p. 62.
13 Foucault, M., "Of Other Spaces", 1986.

transitory, precarious aspect".[14] This angle of pessimism or negativity can be, in some ways, expanded into a potent vessel for critique.[15] By emplacing itself in a tangential register in both form and content to socialist realism, Savu thwarts the perspective on *work* as leading to the fulfillment of revolutionary aspirations, as the moralist aspect of compulsory productivity is made absent from the painter's aestheticisation of real unfoldings, unmasking disciplinary connotations. Critiquing this moralism, furthermore, the scenes equally stand as oppositional to a neoliberal, globalised ideal of the ever-capable, ever-shapeshifting migrant worker. In a Revista ARTA interview, interestingly quoting the artist in the tile *Everything is Possible* on the Periphery, asked whether his characters are disillusioned or drifting, Savu responds:

> *"They are drifting. I don't think these people have even had the time to think about disillusionment as the leitmotif of their lives. Rather, they have been looking for ways to adapt to change, to understand the world they live in, to find new opportunities in a free world where they are no longer told what to do but at the same time, they are carried along by the tide of time and history, which they do not control. They are dragged along by history. They try to find their place and meaning in the middle of this stream."*[16]

Through their hauntological landscapes, therefore, the works lend themselves to an understanding of the melancholic event as collectively experienced, affective moments that break away from certain imposed discourses. The time-rupturing diffraction and confusion of material and semiotic hierarchies through melancholia is, at the same time, fragmented by its linguistic silence and therefore monadically enclosed in individual subjects. Further, if not *anti-*, melancholia is at least *para*-nostalgic through its modest gravity that however does not forget irony, a drifting openness of not-conscious or not-yet-conscious processes. The melancholic event is then a *micro*-politics of displacement and dispossession, by which a power that centralises and orders is temporarily melted into heavy air.

I believe this link unlocks compelling avenues by which postsocialist melancholia might be repoliticised– in non-essentialist, situated ways.

14 Ibid., p. 26.
15 See for instance Sedgwick (1997) on paranoid and reparative critical practices.
16 Savu, S. in Marincu, D., "Everything is Possible on the Periphery", 2024.

Obliquing the realness of postsocialism. Towards a partial ending.

If the confrontation with ghosts is a meeting of change and transformation of both the self and social relations, then, living in those silences, in the stillness of the forest or the photograph or the text, I also feel a spark of hope for what might happen.

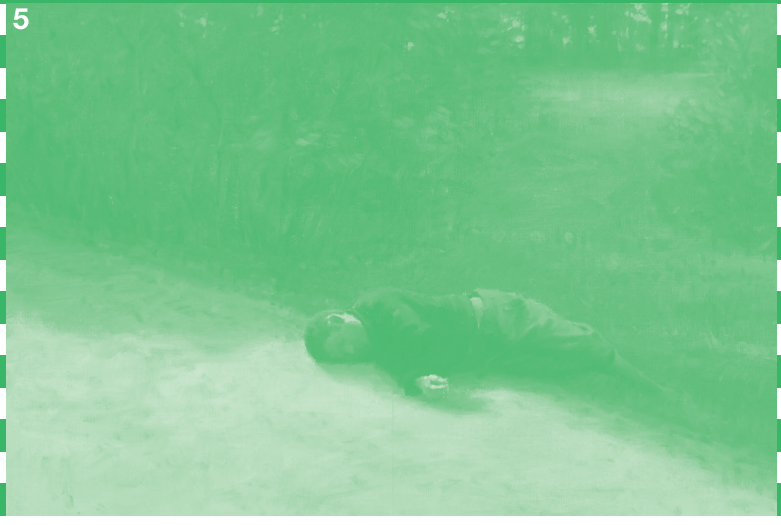
—KJ Cerankowski, "The Time of Pain, A Hauntology", 2021, p. 118.

Știi că n-am nicio putere
Știi că n-am nicio speranță[17]

—Renato din Sălaj + Ion din Dorobanți - Nu e Înjosească (N-am Cărți de Credit), Future Nuggets Records, 2017

In what is left, I want to briefly speculate on the capacities of the postsocialist melancholic event when it is brought to consciousness as a micropolitics. Here, I am particularly triggered by the work *Enlightenment*, specifically the effect of ironic bafflement constructed by the stark contrast between the painting's content, showing, in beautifully cold colours, the sleeping body of a man on the side of what appears to be a country road, and the painting's title. I was immediately tempted to critically fabulate with this *named* image and to elope into Theory Dreamland with its collapsed man. There, the two of us would be taking a break from what I tentatively want to call the *realness* of postsocialist quotidian performances–aesthetically artificial practices of flexing hegemonic masculinities/femininities, success, prosperity, and orthodoxisms that, through their counterpart and concealed melancholic events, in fact know themselves as failing, clownish and rather sad.

5



In spirit, postsocialist realness shares with socialist realism the artificiality of its social mask.[18] While being lost from the canvases painted by ideo-

17 "Know I got no power / Know I got no hope"
18 Wang, X. "Feral Socialist Realism", 2024.

logues, in the Romanian context, socialist utopian dreams never waned on a societal level, since state socialism was not animated by a revolutionary impulse in the first place, but an imperially imposed normativity that was untruthfully exercised by most individuals. Still, what differs fundamentally between the two masks is how, nowadays, the artificiality of cultural practices is no longer bureaucratically imposed, but has as its locus the individual body as the new frontier where social norms and rationality ('bunul simț') are being reinforced.[19] Savu's characters, as much as ourselves, are not inhabiting the aftermath of a communist fervour, but the bitter finale of 1990s Western-capitalist-oriented exuberance and its sincere campiness. I see the oblique sleeping posture of the collapsed male body as a figurative and embodied articulation of a phenomenological device[20] that reorients enlightenment as a mode of thinking–in the body's melancholic pause, the already waning rational subject of modernity is further broken and disorientated. This time in a hopeful reading, one that wishes for more empathetic contamination between different lived experiences of disenfranchisement, I claim the momentum of the oblique posture as a failure that can be queered, transmuted from the white and male rage that is dangerously veering into fascism. I claim melancholia as one art of failure in Halberstam's sense, recognising "that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent"[21], exploiting "the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities".[22]

In the midst of my**our worst nightmares, I wish to seep this modest proposal of acknowledging each other as melancholic and lost beings–through the cracks of a polarised veil that powerlessness has created for itself in the ruins of a perpetually disempowering neoliberal and necropolitical governance.

The end... :)

19 Preciado, P. B., "Learning From The Virus", 2023.
20 Ahmed, S., Queer Phenomenology, 2006.
21 Halberstam, J., The Queer Art of Failure, 2011, p. 88.
22 Ibid., p. 88.

Images:

2 Serban Savu, What Work Is, The Romanian Pavilion at the 60th edition of the Venice Biennale, exhibition view
3 Arkady Plastov, 'Collective Farm Holiday', cca 1937, oil on canvas
4 Serban Savu, 1st of May, 2024. Oil on board, 31 x 45 cm.
5 xxxxxxxxxx

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The protagonist lives during the Romantic era. There isn't much left for women to do. She is still searching for her path. In the process, she's so indecisive that people laugh at her. She hides her embarrassment behind a strong and expressive personality. She writes poetry. Should she write poetry forever, or would it be better to marry? Aren't there other prospects for a woman like her?

She goes for a walk—how should one imagine nature? Probably, in line with the era, as "untouched," though soon to be cut through by railways and the dreadful clatter of the sewing machine. She thinks of that Pinterest quote: "Show, don't tell," meaning you should state facts but show emotion. So to illustrate her closeness to death, nothing is said. Instead, it's described how she thinks of that Billie Eilish video: *"Everyone is gonna die and no one is gonna remember you. So fuck it."* In this context, it sounds as if there's something to lose if you care too much about whether you might fail—and end up forever remembered as embarrassing. The question is whether something like that was even possible during the Romantic period. People were probably deeply tied to their social status, so second thoughts about what the neighbors might think were likely nothing new. On the other hand, there was God—the only one you truly owed an explanation. And belief in progress was just emerging, so perhaps thanks to technology, she could believe in missed opportunities and a future.

I'm not afraid. I have bigger fis to fi

Is that a connection between her and Billie Eilish? I'd say the Billie Eilish quote carries a nihilistic undertone, maybe rooted in today's profound sense of hopelessness about the future. Which brings us to the question of all questions: Has everything always been equally terrible throughout human history? Or has the bad simply started increasing exponentially at some point?

I am always torn between distancing myself from life so that it won't catch me off guard when it decides to slip away—through cancer, long COVID, a terrorist attack, a natural disaster, a personal loss—and the attempt to counteract life's fleeting nature with more life: having a child, trying to make my tutor love me because of my unconventional way of associatively linking knowledge with the incomparable experience one gains in life when surrendering to the banal, auch in der Sbahn, auch in den Schönhauser Allee Arcarden.

I just feel like I need space and time to figure out what I really want and then do my own thing! Sometimes I really do think the secular convent

for young ladies is great, and I'm grateful for it. But when I listen to myself, deep down, I think I need to pause again and truly find out where I'm being drawn. But I also need to protect myself. I've pretty much brushed off all the criticism from the past year without really processing it, because it drains my energy. And honestly, it was incredibly stupid: "Ein Frauenzimmer, das den Kopf voll Griechisch hat, […] mag nur immerhin noch einen Bart dazu haben; denn dieser würde vielleicht die Miene des Tiefsinns noch enntlicher ausdrücken, um welchen sie sich bewerben."
I'm not afraid.
I have bigger fish to fry.
There is no value in external recognition that is tied to my own worth.
I try something.
I fail at it.
In judgment, there is no universal truth that concerns me.
I'm not afraid.

I want to die a hero's death—*right now!* I've thought that many times before. Now!
Please, now!
Although… perhaps I should live just a little longer, just until I've grasped something of Schelling's divine philosophy!
But then—let me die a hero's death!!!

Outside, a car honked for so long that she couldn't imagine anything in traffic justifying such prolonged honking. Except maybe someone was parked in.

sh
ry.

Dear French cousin Solange, with whom I keep a steady correspondence, I have a feeling that seems almost within reach, and yet paradoxically exists only in its unattainability.
A longing to arrive—like when I sit down on a pre-warmed train seat on a cold day: unbearably intimate, and yet so right.
Like when I search for an object in a flat, and it's in the most illogical spot—but that's exactly where I find it.
Like when I ignore an important task in favor of something that brings me joy, fully aware I can't do the task tomorrow. What should I call this longing, Solange?
Ach, these rhetorical questions are exhausting—by the time your reply reaches me in a month, I probably won't even remember what I was talking about.
"The word you seek is homesickness, my most dearly beloved", you will write. And I shall think: What word? I seek my keys—again I am too late.

Has everything always been equally terrible throughout human history?

On an excursion, she met the philologist and myth researcher called C.. She pretended to be witty, which wasn't difficult for her. C. was married, but his wife was old, not like Nicole Kidman, but really old, but rich and also his ticket to university. She had never thought about him before, but she did now. It was tricky and ideal, the two of them let themselves fall back to get to know each other, C.'s wife was somehow always in the way, which made it romantic, because if they had wanted to say something private to each other, it wouldn't have been possible. As a person of language, he impressed her and touched her self-doubt, which overcame her when she wanted to revise her poems. "How could that be?" she asked herself aloud in her quiet room at the secular convent for young ladies, 'First so brilliant and then so bad, so, so bad!'. C. found everything she told him about her artistic practice interesting, it was a relief.
They began to meet in secret. In the evenings, she looked forward to carrying on with her daily life, savoring the feeling of not being fully present in it.

Description of how it could have been:
The next afternoon, as agreed, he came through the back of her garden to pick her up for a walk. For the sake of propriety, he took off his hat and remarked how pleasant the weather was, 20 degrees and cloudy, I wonder if she would be up for a walk? And she looked up at the sky, the whole performance of the gesture was to show that she was weighing things up and now she couldn't go back, because she knew that you have to chew if you bite and so she played coy: "Actually I'm on the verge of a nervous breakdown." She said and immediately regretted it, so she quickly added: "but I think I can postpone it." The wind was blowing through the trees and he was visibly struggling for words, but finally he got over himself and asked the only interesting rhetorical question at this point: "What's left to fear if we love each other?"

Being in your mid-to-late 20s and going through every possible emotional state on a single walk.

The sweet spot—when suddenly everything seems possible. It has to be clear that the two of them believe they are about to change everything. They want to create a utopia because they simply can't endure the world as it is any longer. In their case, this initially means 'free love', because, above all, they want to love each other without C. having to leave his wife. They even have a plan: the wife can just keep taking care of the house while also leading a life that is free and poetic. The two of them fail to recognize the possibility of friendship; instead, they rely on grand visions. She didn't worry, C. was a messenger, she recognized him as such. She stopped writing to Solange, the search seemed to be over.

Lieber C.,
I had a hard time before we met. I needed confirmation so badly that I was "generating output" all the time, to use that extraordinarily beautiful phrase

for artistic creation again. I wrote and wrote and in the evening I lay in bed and was electrified. Even after the setbacks of the day, and the ego insult and the doubt, even after asking myself: how did I get into this and when should I have cleared up this misunderstanding?
It's all different now. Now I lie awake at night wondering if you think I'm sexy.
Alles Liebe --.
C.'s wife didn't care about any of this, by the way. What did she care about this wimpy upstart? Das Politikum, das zur Zeit der Frühromantik im Sozialen lag, ist kompliziert, but in introspection she really didn't care.
She was lying in bed, making wet noises (the cold). How to tell a story where nothing really happened? Everything was alright. Then suddenly it wasn't because the body was reminded of the cold and responded with the dizziness. Then that, too, stopped, because she remembered that she had distanced herself from the body-soul dualism. She just wanted to say "I", and no one should interfere with that anymore. I I I.

Outside, someone was walking past with his boyfriend. Outside, someone was sitting in the sun with a coffee. Outside, someone was smoking a cigarette on the phone. Outside, someone was buying Prosecco for dinner. They were wise. Or clueless in their daily business and their vices, they didn't even feel guilty, because they thought: today is not the day to stop.
She pulled out her pen again:
"Schatz, you have to be completely honest with me, if you like the poem, I'm leaving you right now and heading out, I don't know where yet, but this energy needs to be turned into movement." And without even a pause for breath, she recited:

This can't go on
Time for a change
It's everyone's right to die during their hobby—
To waltz into fate with no second glance,
Just like it's my right to mess up my bangs.

A short time later, C. looked regretfully at the door that had just closed in front of him and thought: "The poem wasn't by her, it was by Goethe, but never mind."

How to tell a story where nothing really happened?

AD

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Artur Lezard

Which Berlin Heritage Buildings you should jump off—A modest Proposal

Denkmal, Denk mal!

In German, *Denkmal* means "monument" or "heritage listed building". But when split into two, *denk mal!* becomes imperative and means think!… *mal*. The addition of *mal* softens the imperative and adds some temporal nuance. You are invited to think exactly now and it is implied you were not doing this prior. *Mal* can also be a noun in its own right, meaning something like "mark". This makes the *Denkmal* a "Thinkmark". It marks a point of intended thinking, a building meant to initiate a cognitive process, a prompt to think about the past, ideas that permeated art, architecture, society or culture at the time.

Which heritage listed buildings in Berlin are absolutely, unquestionably suicide-inducing?

Your alarm bells should be ringing. Who decides what a *Denkmal* is and therefore gets to instruct us on when to think and what to think about? The *Denkmalamt* ("Thinkmark Office")! Which is part of the state! Yes, the state is telling you which buildings to think about when you pass them. The fundamentalist libertarian in me is coughing blood at this. The pragmatist libertarian, however, doesn't really mind, because:

1. The 'Denkmalamt' is mainly run by architects who judge based on historical or architectural significance, as opposed to some sort of propaganda agenda.
2. I have only rarely disagreed with its judgements, only perhaps with its focus: The "Denkmalamt" loves public buildings, which I care for only marginally.
3. It is underfunded anyway.
4. If you are not aesthetically minded you could say its main societal function (rare cases aside) is to dispense tax breaks: owners of heritage real estate may deduct depreciation of their property at a much higher rate from their taxable income every year.
5. And generally the office acts less prescriptively and more empirically, choosing buildings to landmark that generate interest, rather than deeming them worthy of it.

Despite its limited practical impact, you can't really discard the argument, that yes, the "Thinkmark Office" defines our thinking, especially *what buildings we think about*. Heritage listed buildings survive at higher rates and they define what aspects of our past we find important, or see at all. At the very least it constructs rose-colored glasses for looking backwards.

It defines the geography of our cities and what we consider its History. Slums are rarely worth preserving. On the heritage listing map the city is littered with bourgeois apartment buildings, villas, museums, schools, universities, town halls, palaces.

What the *Amt* can bias less, except with often pathetically short register entries, is *what we think about the buildings*. And so, because this article is not really about the failings of this particular part of the state, but about its broader paradoxes and, in some way or another, my own failings, I would like to, in the now famously free-speech starved Germany, draw my own conclusions and ask a somewhat unsavoury question:
Which heritage listed buildings in Berlin are absolutely, unquestionably suicide-inducing?

#1 Watershed

This witchy, sloth-like monster on Glogauer Straße has long been an object of my obsession, so much so that I once tried to devote an entire essay to it. I adore its slit windows and ridiculously steep-looking staircase. It's a Ludwig Hoffmann school gym building with a stucco facade and nordic ornamentation. Both features are quite unique for the usually brick, public school buildings of the turn of the twentieth century.

Ludwig Hoffmann was Wilhelm II favourite Architect and it is at least somewhat unusual for him to build something as measly as a Kreuzberg School complex. Maybe the large, fully street-adjacent plot attracted him. Schools at the time were usually built in a blocks yard space, with only a small entrance building visible from the street, not an attractive proposition for an architect trying to leave a *mark*.

The fire safety office, notably different from the “Thinkmarkoffice”, has recently noticed, after decades of the top floor of the building being in use as a library, that it lacks the legally required number of emergency exits. As a result, it has been closed. A a replacement “pop-up” now sits in the yard, inside a matte-black shipping container. It rests on top of a rubber tarmac patch, right where the main school building stood before it went up in flames before World War II. A few community gardeners have built some raised beds here, so only certain other things are lit up these days. The necessary refurbishment and addition of the singular missing fire exit will likely happen…sometime. I have checked the city budget for this year and the next and unsurpisingly, no funding has been allocated.

During the time I was writing the first, ill-fated essay about this gym, I had a brief e-mail exchange with my friend Alan. He referred me to Christopher Alexanders *A pattern language*. Being on his second stroke and a Baby Boomer techno-optimist, this meant sending me a ChatGPT summary of the Theory and then sending me the ChatGPT explanation of the fact that the theory was abandoned by Alexander and I should therefore read his newer, 1500 page work *The Nature of Order*.

I did not do that, nor did I read much of *A pattern language* (don’t tell Alan), but as I understand it, it is an empirical study of architectural beauty. It sees such beauty mainly as an object’s property of “wholeness”. When we sense a beautiful object, it triggers a certain cognitive process. Contrary to those processes the “Thinkmarkoffice” aims to produce, the experience of beauty is marked by a feeling of not having to think about things at all. Some things feel like they are ordered just “right”. Beauty does not need to be explained and can be recognised intuitively.

Theory, even if only consumed in morsels, is an attractive proposition. So I tried to explain to myself why I thought the gym was beautiful. I just could not justify it. Suddenly, I actually found it to be stupid and ugly. The top left corner of the tower is particularly bothersome. It protrudes without any counterbalance and I have confirmed in person that this is not the fault of the angle of the picture.

In *A Pattern Language* Alexander concerns himself with details as door handles. I guess they are probably fine in this case... I had never looked at this building from closer than across the street. Was it good or bad? Did I need to look more closely? Did I care? Maybe I just thought it was unique?

Also: I really do not care for Ludwig Hoffmann and only want to find one of his buildings beautiful. That spot has recently been taken by the Kreuzberg Baerwaldbad, which is as dilapidated as this building might soon be.

Now the contents of the theory actually does not matter, as ChatGPT (Alan) had already explained to me, but all of this made me think about the possibility of objective beauty and in turn made it clear that my judgement, which I had believed capable of recognising that objective beauty, was actually flimsy. Apparently the state of Berlin does not really appreciate what it has here, and neither do I. And what really is the point of life if you can’t even rely on yourself? This was almost as bad as when, at a fresh

twelve years old, I fount out that pretty much all of Berlins stucco ornamentation is factory-made and not the result of master craftsmanship. So next time you pass Glogauer, do yourself a favor: before you start thinking too much, walk into the ground floor gymnasium, pour some gasoline onto the linoleum, light a match and see whether you can find the missing fire exit.

so tried to explain to myself why I thought the gym was beautiful.

#2 Déclassement

Recently while walking from one of those ATMs that are the result of a google maps algorithm fever dream to an infamous hot dog store, hoping that my pretend American wife had hard cash euros, I encountered this beauty:

She's gorgeous, especially the ordered grid of windows. There are claims she is littered with freemason symbols, including dolphins. Which the "Thinkmarkoffice" of course, in its usual lack of imagination, says cannot be verified.

But my loyal reader will recognise the problem. A few months ago I wrote my first substack post about a building on Potsdamer Straße. I don't recommend you read it, because it is horribly boring and like a lot of first kisses was mostly driven by a feeling of "lets get this over with".

In it I claim the building, "has a white clinker brick street facing facade [that, to my knowledge] is otherwise unique in today's West Berlin."

I had already realised I was wrong about this. A similar AEG built settlement from the same Era exists in Wilmersdorf, but I had kept quiet. It's far away and outside the ring, which gave me plausible deniability. But now it dawned on me. How embarrassing! This clinker building is just around the corner from the purportedly singularly clinkered one and I've known about it for quite a while. What a dreadful mistake.

Just to save myself some future embarrassment: I know my error runs deeper and white clinker is somewhat plentiful in West Berlin, not last seen in a beautiful town house next to Villa Grisebach on Fasanenstraße. And just for those still confused, clinkers are bricks burnt at a high temperature, which gives them a ceramic surface.

All I wanted to do in that moment was ring a bunch of doorbells at Goltzstraße 32 until someone let me in, climb the five stories, climb through the likely fire-alarm secured hatch at the top of the stairwell onto the roof and jump.

Have you ever felt like you don't exist? That you are only part of an Ensemble? Without any individualised significance? That you, alongside others, simply exemplify a particular moment in the development of your surroundings?

#3 Extinction

Have you ever felt like you don't exist? That you are only part of an Ensemble? Without any individualised significance? That you, alongside others, simply exemplify a particular moment in the development of your surroundings?

This is how I feel when I get two scoops of ice cream for 8 Euros at the new shop around the corner, riding the waves of what some call gentrification. And it's probably how the building at Skalitzer Straße 46 feels, landmarked only as part of an *Ensemble*. A walk along Skalitzer Straße from 47 to around 45b traces the development of the area around the former Görlitzer Bahnhof. I don't mean today's U-Bahn stop, but the original from 1866, the rubble of which now forms Görlitzer Park.

Starting at 45b: The first buildings are set back from the sidewalk by small gardens. They have what you might call London-esque, street accessible half-cellars. These were often used to store coal and provided easy access for its delivery. 46 already lacks this feature. What it does still have is a Kreuzberg classic: The corner-accentuating tower. Two buildings further, at the next corner, 46b omits this entirely. It also features a conventional street-level storefront, that allowed for commercial use. The buildings become more unique, as architecture becomes more important to each developer and the area becomes thoroughly mixed-use and therefore truly urbanised.

Despite their appearance, none of these buildings catered to particularly wealthy residents. They sit somewhere in between the slum housing that is frequent around the old train station site and Görlitzer Railway Company directors apartments that lie further down Skalitzer Straße, just past the park.

Now the "Thinkmarkoffice" has decided that none of these buildings have individual merit, but together they tell a story worth preserving, that is why they are an ensemble. I can barely muster any offence at this and I think it is probably the "correct" designation. The evil comes from a different source: centralised city planning.

The green line is the walk I described above.; Bebauungsplan VI-99, Berliner Senat, Gesetz und Verordnungsblatt Nr. 64, S. 1444, 1972

I haven't included the legend here, but above is the current district zoning plan for the area. The red rectangle marks the buildings I have been discussing. Half of them are coloured yellow. This means they are zoned as "street".

Those long lines represent the *künftige Südtangente*; the "future south-tangent". An up-to-eight-lane road that was planned in the 1970s but never completed, at least not in Kreuzberg. Parts of Schöneberg on the other hand were chopped to bits for it. That is how we ended up with the beautiful crossing of Martin-Luther-Straße, Kleiststraße, Lietzenburger Straße and An der Urania, with a collective 16 lanes. I'd include both of these zoning decisions in Berlin's delusions of grandeur, in its particular form of 1960s urban futurism.

There is no space here for extensive quoting from the planning process that goes beyond the following, but the records are in the public domain, if you are of that certain persuasion. The building at 46b was owned by a jewish family, that ran an apothecary in it for a long time, (the rest is history). Their heirs expressed concerns the church across the road would be cut off from nearby living area by the tangent. The district offi-

cials remarked that this could not be a problem because the road would be built “plan-free”, which in German zoning law means: Above ground, on large concrete stilts. Often I am grateful that Berlin government has rarely ever been functional.

So what if, legally, you did not exist? Would it be surprising that parts of your face are covered with tarps to stop falling stucco, like Skalitzer Straße 46 now is. Look up at its facade for a while and you will recognise the feeling. Do it long enough until the long-awaited, deadly chunk of stucco finally falls and hits you in the face, just as Socrates was shit on by a lizard…

The evil comes from a different source: centralised city planning.

All images: Landesdenkmalamt Berlin, https://www.berlin.de/landesdenkmalamt/

Mücahit Türk

Why does a body move?

Life's not light. Can't describe it. Best you can do is imagine it anew. Wish for it anew. And be struck by your own cruelty. And trying to develop a feeling for when it has been lost. Things close in and nothing happens. And if someone is still surprised. And if someone surprises themselves. Well, have you ever watched a spider faced to a mirror. Watched it as it lost its mind. Watched it as it slowly starts picking itself apart. Ripping its legs one by one. Or have you watched some father and his child. Their hands roped in; lovers hold hands. And Someone pulls. And someone is pulled. So why does the body move? Can't describe it. Best you can do is imagine it anew. The famous jazz pianist who pushes his piano aside and starts to kill. The Choir Boy Robber, that only ever bowed his head to keep his face off the tapes. The same garbage man for forty years, who one day leaves all garbage behind. Things close in. As things are going, until they stand in front of their own. Or have you ever felt like a Swiss Mountain Range. Have you ever felt like Great Lake Michigan. Like a swamp. Like black bile. Or have you ever let your body get washed by someone else. And you feel a hand that is not yours. And you feel the water in-between. Feel everything that is not yours. And you feel like a Swiss Mountain Range. You feel like Great Lake Michigan. Why is this body moving? Can't describe it. Best you can do is imagine it anew. Wish for it anew. And things close in until they stand in front of their own. The famous jazz pianist pushes all garbage behind. The Choir Boy Robber, that only ever bowed to his child. And one is pushing his hands aside. And you feel a hand that is not yours. Feel everything that is not yours. Roped in. Lovers do that. And as Shampoo creaks, she makes her hands into a sponge. Life's not light. Anyone will tell you.

Life's not light.

Anyone will tell you.

AD

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At the still point of the moving world, I surrender my groin to the end of history, and bleed out the sorry regret of aesthetics, for the market is strong, and the cheques are blooming. Christine is waiting, here it goes.

I beckon you, Civilian. We muster arm in arm a belief in the purity of our gesture, and the comedy of the Twenty First Century demands a quiet, new way. For how sad our paintings cry, and how distraught your sculpture screams!
but here we are, we are laughing, and we are serious.

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He looked up into the loose, panting drool and caught the dog's paw before it came down on his face. He and the dog share a grunt of — what? Not despair, but something effusive and powerless like that. Rolling onto his front he pushed his weight into his hands and got up from the ground. It was not a warm or pleasant evening. Few people were about. The dog's owner was still turning in circles at the other end of the grass, her body curled over her phone. She hadn't seen him fall, or hadn't looked. The dog lost interest and trotted away. Around the edge of the park, yellow light was appearing in the windows of apartments. A steamy smell like pasta water or boiled potatoes, dinners on stoves. He considered walking further, trying somewhere else, but the thought was already folding itself away, so he headed towards the park's exit, pacing the ache out of his cold, stiff joints.

He was beginning to doubt himself. The doubt was different to the uneasiness he'd felt at the beginning, which was the unease of unknowing, of mild transgression. Lately it was more of an odd numbness. First numbness, then unease about what the numbness meant.

How had it begun? The first time was real. Waiting for a tram on a blank day, the sky suddenly worming with white dots. He remembered a silvery sweat on his upper lip, a swell and a rushing upwards. Then he was on the ground, and a hand was jabbing at his shoulder blade. Something told him to keep his eyes shut. *No*, was the feeling. A good, simple no. But then there were two cold fingers on the pulse in his wrist and talk of calling an ambulance, and this unsettled him. He got to his feet, keeping his gaze low. A woman with swollen ankles who had been squatting beside him rose too, a child tugging at her skirt. A man in padded cycling shorts put a granola bar into his hand before backing away, and the small ring of remaining spectators were reabsorbed into the drift and hum of the street.

Riding the tram after this minor fuss he'd felt strangely conspicuous, as though the episode had marked him, like a stain on a shirt, and would continue to attract attention all the way home. He'd never fainted before, and he wondered if he should text someone, share the milestone. He felt glum and envious, as though something important had happened and he'd missed it.

The second time, a few weeks later, was almost real. Distracted by a string of notifications from work, he'd left the underground station from a different exit, one he'd never used before, and this set him on an unfamiliar route towards home. He guessed his way onto a side street, passing a wine bar with a terrace where darkly dressed people were smoking and sucking the stones out of big olives. He felt their curiosity move lazily over his body as he went by. A few strides later he realised he'd missed a turning and would have to stop on the spot, turn back. He'd have to choose when and how to enact this realisation, or reenact, since the realisation had already happened and he was still walking. The people on the terrace would watch his pink face turning back towards them, they would search his face for a narrative.

Something told him to keep his eyes shut. *No*, was the feeling, a satisfying clarity.

He waded into a few seconds of dull panic, then let his arms go slack. He sunk his weight into his knees and let knees, hip, shoulder hit the ground with a faltering thud. And then he just lay there, fascinated with himself. As a man from the terrace jogged over, shouting *hey, hey,* his heart raced and he closed his eyes.

There was a third time like this, then a fourth, and soon the episodes linked into a sequence. Lulls in the rhythm of the sequence began to swell with expectation. Each fall left him thinking about the next. He wanted to believe that what was happening was involuntary, but in reality it had become something he couldn't stop. He couldn't stop because he didn't want to. The anticipation, the doubt, the moment of handing himself over to it. He wasn't sure what he meant by doing what he was doing, only that it felt true.

So this is what he did. He travelled to suburbs of the city where he was unlikely to be recognised, usually on weekday evenings when the after-work rush was dwindling. He'd find a quiet street or a small square with only a few people around, and then he would collapse. And he would lie very still, exactly as he had fallen, eyes closed or gazing into near space, entirely unresponsive to the people who came to prod at him. After a while he wasn't daunted by the ambulance anymore. It became part of the routine. The medics would strap him into the van and rattle along beside him, quietly impatient with his steady breathing, the absence of any immediately treatable crisis. Only when they were wheeling him inside the hospital did he begin to answer their questions. No, he hadn't taken anything; yes, he might have hit his head; no, he didn't remember what had happened. He tried not to hear his own voice. He would do nothing unless he was told to. The hospital trips always ended in the same way. After a few basic tests, they'd say he could go home. That there was nothing else to do but go home.

*****

At work he shared a desk with Mike. Their monitors stood back to back, obscuring their faces from each other, but through the gap below he could see Mike's hand on the mouse, the pockmarked mouse-mat, a can of diet Sprite. He had come to associate the sound of Mike's voice with this view, so the sight of Mike's actual face sometimes felt like looking into a too-bright light. He did not tell Mike about the collapsing, the ambulances, the walking around alone in the suburbs.

You'd get to own the apartment, said Mike's voice from behind the monitors. Mike had a habit of thinking up hypothetical dilemmas, pitting two unlikely or impossible scenarios against each other for nothing more

than the light sport of debate. This time Mike wanted to know if he'd agree to have a finger cut off in exchange for an apartment.

Do I get to choose the apartment?
No. But it's in a decent neighbourhood. And you can sell it later if you want.
Let's say you get to choose the finger.

They talked it through for a while, dryly, as if one of his fingers were really at stake. As if, by the end of the afternoon, he'd have lost either a finger or a recently renovated two-room flat with a south-facing balcony. He looked down at his large, flat hands.

*****

There were variations in the way people responded to his falls: those who'd rush to be at the centre of the spectacle, bristling with excitement as they barked first-aid instructions. There were impatient types who'd slink away as soon as they heard the jolt of the ambulance handbrake. Invariably he was left feeling disappointed, without quite knowing what he'd expected. Mostly people just wanted to set him back into the stream of normality, send him on his way again, like righting an upturned beetle. This, he felt, was missing the point. But what was his point? There was a certain thrill in the sensation of strangers' hands on his body, but it was the impersonality of this, the lack of intimacy, that was important. It was not about sympathy or attention. It was about the act of collapsing itself. Why 'act'? He did not want to act. That was the point. He wanted the absence of all that. To refuse all agency, all decision-making. The unmediated simplicity of a body given to gravity. He often pictured a child, a little too old to be carried, feigning sleep at the end of a long car journey so that a parent might carry him to bed. Brow furrowed with the task of dreaming, draped over a giant shoulder. He wanted to be that motionless body. Limp, exempt.

*****

Certain places he longed to collapse, but could not. In the west of the city there were stone cherubs jeering from facades, bare breasted stone mermaids worn down by rain. But those neighborhoods were full of rich old ladies in furs walking small fat dogs. The ladies were both too frail and too vain to come to his aid. He thought often about the high, vaulted ceilings of the portrait museum, the shallow steps approaching the university library, a magnolia tree that in spring people were always stopping to photograph – tilting their phones upwards into its white-pink hysteria, blind to the mash of rotting petals underfoot. There was a street in the town he'd grown up in where the twin yellow globes of a zebra crossing flashed out of sync, had done so forever, night and day, year after year throughout his childhood – an eerie, stumbling, unending rhythm.

*****

He and Mike edited videos for a pet shop's YouTube channel. Not really a pet shop – just insects. A shop specialising in ants. People bought ants to put inside large glass ant farms. Rare and collectible ants. Mostly he and Mike edited short How-To videos and product reviews. This week he was editing a video in which the shop's expert cleans out a failed ant farm to prepare it for a new colony. The expert uses a small brush to sweep the curled-up ant corpses out of the glass tank. Mike said it makes more sense to think of the colony, rather than the ant itself, as the organism; the individual ants as cells in the organism's body. Ant behaviours are programmed based on their role in the colony. The individual ant understands the world as a system of processes and exchanges and does what it has to in order to keep the colony alive. It senses a food source and collects it, it senses danger and it attacks. It has no desires, only functions.

Once, Mike told him about a film he'd seen, about a man who couldn't move his body without looking at it. If he wanted to move his arm, he had to look at his arm; had to watch and intend every gesture. If someone turned out the lights, Mike said, the man would fall over.[1] Every movement that should appear automatic became puppet-like, like bad acting. A bad actor is one who watches themselves too closely. A good actor is one who embodies their body so totally that there is no thinking, no gap or delay between real and performance.

Do you ever do CMD-Z in your head? He asked Mike. *Like you do something dumb – in real life, and your brain goes 'CMD-Z'.*

And then what happens? said Mike.

Nothing happens, he replied.

A slab of sunlight pushed suddenly into the office. The windows had blinds programmed to respond to such fluctuations, and gently they whirred into action, rotating gracefully to re-regulate the distribution of light.

He still believed, if conflictedly, in the honesty of the collapse.

1 An idea borrowed from a film by Emily Wardill, discussed in this interview: https://youtu.be/FP2zQMc3qHY?si=d-7pwjDDn7Z7noaK

*****

He was in an ambulance again, strapped flat on his back. No sirens, no rush, just the gentle easing and surging of the engine, the bobbing of the vehicle's suspension over potholes. One of the paramedics was watching him closely: a pale oval unmoving in his peripheral vision. He glanced in its direction then quickly away again, but the afterimage of a flat, slack mouth danced inscrutably in his mind for the rest of the journey.

On arrival he was taken to a teal-curtained cubicle where a woman with a wrist tattoo of a shooting star pulled on a pair of latex gloves and thumbed through his hair to check his scalp. She asked about head trauma, ear infections, if this had happened before. He said no. He was led to another room with a grey bed and a machine sprouting cables with rubbery discs on the end. This had not happened before. She unrolled a strip of paper towels along the length of the bed and told him to undress, then turned away as he did so.

When he climbed up and lay back, wearing nothing but his socks and boxers, she didn't look at his white belly or the hairless patch on each inner upper thigh where they rubbed together. She was gathering the cables, sticking the discs on his chest, wrists, ankles, applying blobs of clear gel from a tube when they would not stay stuck. He had seen something like this in movies and TV shows, but had never been compelled to understand what it was or how it worked. He hoped it would go on a long time. Her touch was neither careful or careless, it was without meaning. He wondered if the clammy moisture at the small of his back would leave a mark on the paper towel, but knew that if it did, she would not react.

After all of the disks were stuck and the machine began to click, he felt nothing. The nurse studied the monitor intently, but he couldn't make out the dim murmurings of its interface. He wondered what other tests they might perform, but didn't dare ask, in case his tone or curiosity might alter their concern in some way. All he had to be now was a body. So he lay there, being nothing but a body, looking up at the ceiling while the machine did its work.

Everything is normal, said the nurse, after only a minute or two. Then she turned away to indicate that he should put his clothes back on again, as if it were the motions of dressing or undressing, not the state of undress itself, that carried the greater shame.

Afterwards he was pointed towards a waiting room where it became unclear if anything else was planned for him or what he should do now. He sat for a while, glancing at the receptionist behind a large perspex screen who caught his eye but did not hold it. He wondered what it would mean for him to collapse here, now, already inside the hospital, the second time in one day. Eventually he bought a packet of Oreos from the vending machine and shuffled out.

*****

Was it something he was *doing*, or something he gave *into*? The distinc-

tions and possible contradictions bothered him. He still believed, if conflictedly, in the honesty of the collapse. But the performance – its drama, its challenges – were becoming part of the seduction too. There was the sense of working towards something, locating it, perfecting it. Through repetition his body was acquiring muscle memories, a choreography that his limbs slid into again and again. If the shape of a gesture becomes so familiar as to happen more or less unconsciously, does it appear more or less authentic?

He could do it at home, in private, but without an audience it wasn't the same. He would stand in the centre of his small room, feeling the dimensions of his tall, heavy figure, his head almost brushing the dust-caked lampshade that hung from the ceiling. He'd anticipate the thud and shake of his weight hitting the building's old floorboards, the scowling but otherwise incurious faces of the neighbours below. He would stand there in the centre of the small room and think and wait, but the fall would not happen to him.

Sometimes he lay down on the bed and committed himself to stillness, starting *now*, an absolute stillness until someone or something came to force him out of it. But with no one around, an itch or the buzz of his phone was all it took for him to lose conviction. Or else he'd end up dozing off, which didn't count. Waking up cold, foggy-headed, the sound of his flatmate in the kitchen chopping something, a podcast thundering from her bluetooth speaker. Marie-Camille was the name of his flat-mate. Always the two names together, never just Marie, or Camille. They lived together but they were not friends. They upheld a tacit, mutual disinterest in each other's lives.

Alright then let's. Ah, yes.
Yeah exactly.
Thanks,
we'll take it from here.
Definitely. Remember us?
Alright then cheers.
Hello mate.
Hello again.
Could you sit up for us
please?

Most nights after work he sat in bed with his laptop watching videos of people fainting, of people with narcolepsy, of stunt actors learning to fall convincingly without injuring themselves. When he went out on his walks he'd often leave these videos playing, the laptop turned up on its side like a birthday card to stop it from overheating on the polyester duvet. Playlists of hundreds of videos, compiled over months, set to shuffle and loop. He'd leave them playing so that he could return home some hours later to find their soft sounds and pale screen-light fumbling on the bed sheets, and could simply climb in beside them, without having to choose what to watch.

At the heart of his falls was some inarticulable anguish about wanting to collapse – in every sense *but* the physical-literal – and not being able to, not knowing how.

*****

Another street, another grey neighbourhood. He is walking, looking for a place that feels right. He glimpses a streak of himself in a large window and stops to peer into the dark space beyond. A wide green linoleum table top, a stack of plywood chairs. Not quite a school, perhaps a community centre. Is that what the place was? Little blush of longing as he thinks of laminated timetables, the smell of photocopier machines, plastic canteen lunch trays. He thinks of the scuffed wooden floors of his old high school. How well he'd known the chill of its brass door knobs, the heavy swing of the fireproof doors. How familiar the sound of his own feet in the carpeted band of corridor that curved, like a padded shell, around the exterior of the assembly hall.

He comes to a small square, then turns away onto one of the streets, goes around a block and comes back again. Other than a locksmith and a florist packing up for the day, it is a quiet, shuttered part of the neighbourhood. The roads are cobbled, but the square is gravelled with a pale, sandy grit. A large stone fountain marks the square's centre, drained this time of year, with chubby stone animals perched at each of its four corners. Some twigs and leaves inside, pigeon shit.

He sits on a low wall, decides he'll wait some minutes. Through a window across the street, the dim shape of two figures embracing turns out to be one person alone, a man crouched on the windowsill, clutching his knees. The man puts out his cigarette slowly, staring fixedly at his own hand as it twists the butt into a saucer of ash. A sound of keys stifled into a pocket: the florist unlocking her bike, cycling off. A couple appears, walking with elbows looped, debating something in hushed tones. He gets up slowly and walks towards them. He looks at the woman's eyes until they rise to meet his. He falls.

*****

His focus is on the flatness of the ground beneath him. His cheek, chest, outer right thigh meeting that flatness. The couple talk in low voices. *Yes*

he's breathing normally. He senses their proximity but can't see them from his position on the ground. One of them inhales deeply, trying to take in his smell, trying to determine whether he is drunk or homeless, whether he is clean enough to touch. Sirens approach, then fall silent at the bottom of the hill. No traffic. He hears the meaty slam of ambulance doors, the rustle of uniforms.

Alright then let's. Oh. Yeah exactly. Thanks, we'll take it from here. Definitely. Thanks.
Hello again. Remember us? Could you sit up for us please?

Three firm taps on his back, more impatient than concerned. His eyes open to the black tarmac, a boot and a knee. He strains his eyes as far as he can towards the face of the crouching paramedic without moving his head, and lands on a familiar expression: the pale oval, the flat mouth. The other paramedics stand around watching. They wait. He waits. Then slowly he gets to his hands and knees. He feels the glare of the streetlights in the sweaty sheen at his hairline and on his upper lip. His clothes release a creamy scent of stale deodorant as they shift against his skin. Once on his feet he begins to walk away from them. He does his best to walk blankly, invisibly. And they watch him go, without following.

*****

In the felt-clad silence of the Uber, he slackens. Passing headlights sweep his vision. His phone lies on one thigh, plugged into the driver's charging cable, warm with furtive processes. As the car turns a curve, he watches the rosy flash of a distant radio tower miss a beat as it passes behind the silhouette of a church. The driver stares ahead, occasionally recording voice messages in a language he doesn't understand. On the car's built-in screen, a pale arrow reaches into a dark grid, and a clock counts down the remaining minutes until home.

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